

Tavola rotonda

TRADUZIONE E RISCrittURA DI DANTE



Gustavo Doré, *Inf.* Canto I



Sandow Birk, *Inf.* I, 1-3,
Dante in the Wilderness.

PINSKY:

I'll speak very briefly under three headings: first, a general theory of translation; second, some particular, practical, and technical matters involved in making an English form of Dante's *terza rima*; and, third, I'll try to say just a few sentences about thematic matters – about the subject matter of Dante's poem, which is a way of responding to what my colleagues have asked: why do people read this work?

My theory of translation is that there is no such thing as translation. *Traducere, translatare*, to carry across, does not apply to meaning. You can carry a loaf of bread across the street or across the room; you cannot carry across the word *pane*: «*pane*» is not «bread» and «bread» is not «*pane*.» I'm told that in Italian you say *buono come il pane*, as good as bread. A good person is *un pezzo di pane*. In English we say such a person is *as good as gold*. *Bread* in English rhymes with *bed*; they are both Germanic words, roots which to a speaker of English sound physical and earthly against a context of words like *nutriment* or *repose*, which come from the Latin or French; *pane* is a romance word in a romance language. The two words are not the same, except for their denotation. Translation is a misnomer. The term I prefer – since what I set out to do was to make a work of art in English – is a more old-fashioned term. In the 16th and 17th centuries they would say, not that they translated this poem, that they had *Englished* it. I tried to make an *Englishing* of the *Inferno* that would be faithful at every moment to Dante's meaning, and that would be a work of art: a poem in English.

My general theory of translation is based on Walter

Benjamin's great essay *The Task of the Translator*. In a certain sense, the *Commedia* by Dante Alighieri is the best translation that will ever be made of an original in the mind of God. No one will ever translate that Platonic original as beautifully or as movingly as Dante did when he translated it into the Italian of his time. However, the Swedish translation, the Japanese translation, the Urdu translation, the Yiddish translation, if they are works of art, each adds a little information about that original in the mind of God: information that even the Italian cannot give because they will say, this is how the Swedish or Yiddish or English had to do something new, had to buckle, and stretch, and reshape itself to accommodate the reality that is *Commedia*. So, if my translation is any good, it expresses among other things how the *Englishing* of the work changes the English language itself, and changes the work. That is my theory. Now, some practical or technical matters.

There is understandable misapprehension in the academic study of verse that presumes that poetry in verse consists of writing in lines, as though the formal energy is contained in the lines or in rhymes. This is a misapprehension because the lines supply only one half of the aesthetic principle. The melodic energy and the moral energy of verse is in the sentences, it is in the syntax – or more precisely in the dance between each sentence, as it does or does not fit into a verse, and the verse. The contest or tango between the sentence and the line *is* the art of verse; otherwise we are studying only the time signature, we are not studying the melody or harmony or rhythm, the actual energy of the writing.

Here is how this observation applies to the translation

of Dante's *terza rima* into English: Dante's line is an eleven-syllable line. The English classic pentameter line also averages out to about 11 syllables. English – in the nature of the two languages – uses fewer syllables than Italian. For example: *selva oscura* = dark wood; *era smarrita* = was lost. If you translate line by line from a language that uses more syllables to a language that uses fewer syllables, if you translate each line to another line, then inevitably you will be adding styrofoam or cardboard or balsa wood for stuffing. It is necessary to pad, if you translate every English line with an Italian line.

Whatever else my translation does, it tries to get the speed and efficiency, the movement without padding, that I had not found in the other English translations. Possibly this is why my version, to the surprise of many, was on best-seller lists. People actually seemed to enjoy reading it, feeling some of Dante's great rapidity and fluidity. He invented *terza rima*, in my opinion, partly because the form enables the writing to be so fast and fluid. So that it changes rapidly: it is epigrammatic, the way couplets would be, or it becomes lyrical and he sings as quatrains might do, or he stops singing and he starts telling a story as blank verse might do, or he stops telling a story and he becomes discursive, as when Virgil discourses on the geography of Hell. In all of these modes all is rapidly moving within each passage, and moving rapidly between modes. That is the opposite of padding.

(Let me say that there is a translation in English that I consider a considerable work of art, which is Longfellow's. Longfellow was by profession a professor of Italian; he was also a great writer of verse. His translation is very beautiful. I relied on it a lot as a trot or pony. Longfellow's form is Miltonic blank verse, with an often-inverted syntax that is not easy for an American reader to stay with – any ten or 12 lines is extremely beautiful, but it can be difficult to go on for 40 or 50 lines.)

Intuitively, not by conscious choice of a system, I translated Dante's sentences, and then I tried to make English rhymes and lines to fit the sentences; the other translations I knew translated Dante's lines, and then tried to make some kind of English sentences out of them. My method gains speed and readability, but there are losses: in my translation you cannot find the famous rhyme word at the end of the English line. Translation always involves compromise. To quote the famous cliché, *traduttore / traditore*, I was a traitor in that I couldn't get the same words at the end of the lines. To me it was more important, and more feasible, to attain some of the original's speed, grace and variation.

The third topic is the thematic material of the poem. Of the 100 canti, Canto I, the dark woods, supplies an introduction to the whole *Commedia*. Therefore, Canto II is the beginning of *Inferno* proper. At the end of Canto I, Dante agrees to go on an extraordinary journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. He is also saying, I'm going to write a poem that will go through hell, moral transfor-

mation and perfection – an ambitious journey for the pilgrim, an ambitious poem for the poet. That's Canto I. Then *Inferno* begins. What's the first thing that happens after he makes that resolution, what is the first thing that happens in Canto II? In American English we would say, he 'gets cold feet'. He despairs. He says, who am I to do this. People will laugh at me, they will say I'm pretentious to undertake such an adventure, to write such a poem, I'm not St. Paul, I'm not Aeneas, I'm just a little writer. We know that Dante also had a high opinion of himself, he knew he could do it. But the first thing he shows us is his fearfulness or discouragement.

I am not and never have been a Christian, I will never be a Christian. However, through English poetry I became fascinated by the Christian idea that evil is a deficiency, a privation, a lack – an idea that the English poets I read derive, ultimately, from Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Evil or sin is a lack or wound – so that the punishment is the soul tearing at itself. As cold is an absence of heat energy, as darkness is an absence of light energy, evil is an absence of soul. It is an unmaking of the soul, a painful self-destruction.

This self-wounding is a great mystery, and perhaps the central concern of *Inferno*. The injuries that others have done to me – they exiled me from my city, they accused me falsely, all the bad things the other people have done to me – these are nothing compared to the injuries I do to myself. Dante finds in himself the worst sin, which is weak faith, thinking, I'm so evil even Jesus Christ can't save me. That lack of soul is the most fatal sin because it refuses the divine mercy that will be extended even to the Hell inside me. To cure himself of this spiritual lack, the Pilgrim goes down into it, he shows himself the parade or pageant of all the ways we injure ourselves. He finally comes to the image, with Ugolino and Ruggieri, of totally useless and unsatisfying revenge, and then by gripping the very shaggy flanks of Evil itself, he ascends to come out on the other side.

I believe that in my country the reasons that the poem remains so enduring, and continues to attract so many readers are two. One is that Dante's syncretic or synthetic imagination, improvising, bringing together classic, Christian, and romance, putting so many things together – profanity, obscenity, spiritual yearning – that plural, improvising process appeals also to the syncretic and synthetic and improvisatory nature of American culture at its best. Perhaps even more, Dante in the first third of his *Commedia* is a poet of spiritual despair: what in medieval English they call *wanhope*, a sense of spiritual lack: the meanness and cynical materialism of our culture at its worst. In America we have the luxury of being quite preoccupied with what in contemporary jargon we call *depression*. The sense of spiritual inadequacy combined with cultural syncretism perhaps instills an appetite for a certain energy: the spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual energy of Dante's *terza rima* streaming ahead to go down and down and deeper into the

mystery of discouragement and the enigma of evil, till he comes out the other side, to see the stars.

FRANCINI:

Vorrei riprendere quanto ha appena detto Robert Pinsky sull'originalità della sua traduzione dell'*Inferno*, su quelle operazioni con le quali ha cercato di trasferire nell'inglese, la velocità e la fluidità dell'originale. Come avverte nell'introduzione, ha dovuto spesso comprimere i versi di Dante per trasmettere la concisione dell'originale, e quindi ridurre il numero nella versione inglese, talvolta in modo significativo. Questa compressione del flusso narrativo è forse la caratteristica più evidente della traduzione di Pinsky, che però presenta anche il procedimento inverso: l'espansione di immagini dantesche tramite aggiunte di aggettivi o sostantivi, soprattutto in coincidenza di versi molto noti. Sembra che in quei momenti, frequenti nel corso della traduzione, l'immaginazione del poeta tradotto entri in sinergia con quella del traduttore, che sente la necessità di allungare la dose per qualche ragione, forse per cercare di afferrare più precisamente l'intensità dell'originale. Troviamo esempi di questo procedimento nel Canto V (vv. 22, 25, 26-27 e 73) e nel Canto VI al v. 26. Gradirei un suo commento in proposito.

PINSKY:

I was aware very rarely of amplifying for clarity. The rule I set myself in getting the rhymes to the end of lines was, never pad or extend to get a rhyme, but rather compress; if you can't get a rhyme to the end, find a way to contract the sentence, or condense the idea. For example in the first *terzina*, the famous opening three lines become in my English a line and two-thirds:

*Midway in our life's journey, I found myself
in dark woods, the right road lost.*

I was very pleased when a reviewer wrote that the phrase, «right road lost», sounds in some way like an American blues song, that it had an American feeling to it. I did not want to vulgarize, but I did like the idea that I was using an American idiom to achieve the compression and forcefulness I find in the original Dante.

[As to Canto V, l. 26] – in the original, «Ora incomincian le dolenti note / a farmisi sentire...»; in English, «And now I can hear the notes of agony // in sad crescendo beginning to reach my ear» – I plead guilty, at that moment it did seem to need the drama. I did add those words.

One must be very sparing in that, and you can compensate for a lot of compression by occasionally enlarging. It's like any form of discourse, sometimes you can earn by enlarging, it's like the people who are doing the simultaneous translation now, at our conference; usually the English would be shorter, sometimes you need more. And after all, Dante is Dante.

FRANCINI:

Anche il v. 83, all'inizio del discorso di Francesca, «If heaven's King bore affection // For such as we are, suffering in this wind, / Then we would pray...», sembra ampliato rispetto all'originale «se fosse amico il re dell'universo, / noi pregheremmo lui de la tua pace...».

PINSKY:

No, [that image] is upwards: «Si tosto come il vento...». Sometimes the phrase comes earlier in the Italian sentence. Here I can plead innocent! I insisted to my publisher that the Italian be *en face*, because I wanted to invite readers to see that, although I was making the language as idiomatic as possible, precision was primary. I think that a verse translation should be clearer than any prose translation can be. The prose translation cannot be as clear as a verse translation because the physicality of the verses is creating a kind of hand gestures or facial gestures, is creating something like italics. If you are doing it right no prose translation can be as communicative, just simply for clarity, as verse translation, if the verse is performing its function.

[As to l. 73] – «With raised wings steady against the current, glide / Guided by will to the sweetness of their nest» for the Italian «con l'ali alzate e ferme al dolce nido / vegnon per l'aere, dal voler portate» – that effect, with «glide» at the end of the line, and then «Guided», with the sound being the same and the syntax reaching across the line, is trying to imitate the Italian «ferme»; you are trying to get something as expressive, as lucid as the original, you are trying to approach the lucidity of the original.

CARPI:

Volevo riallacciarmi brevemente a quanto detto dai colleghi russisti, riguardo in particolare alla fortuna che la *Divina Commedia* ha ritrovato negli ultimi decenni in Russia, sia sul versante delle traduzioni con esperimenti molto arditi come quello di Iljušin sia sul versante dell'influenza su poeti contemporanei. Per la verità sembrerebbe che la Russia contemporanea sia molto lontana da quello che può essere l'immaginario dei tempi di Dante. A me sembra che ci siano delle somiglianze, ossia il momento dello sgretolamento dell'impero retto da un'ideologia monolitica, l'impero di Federico II, l'impero cristiano universale per Dante, e l'Unione Sovietica con la sua ideologia altrettanto monolitica, la liberazione di una soggettività nuova e di nuove figure sociali – questa soggettività nuova che si pone in un rapporto ambiguo con la totalità appena distrutta, appena passata, che ne crea un mito: quello che noi riscontriamo durante tutta la *Divina Commedia*, un mito che, a contatto con la modernità, è come se si sgretolasse in tanti piccoli micro-miti che poi l'io poetico deve in qualche modo rimettere insieme attraverso questa esperienza di viaggio come auto-costruzione della personalità. Questo forse può essere un punto di contatto fra la sensibilità dei poeti contemporanei e dell'intellettualità russa contempo-

anea e quello che loro possono trovare in un poeta come Dante.

In sintesi la domanda è la seguente: se l'interesse per Dante della intelligenza americana, sia degli scrittori che si rifanno a Dante, sia del pubblico che legge Dante in traduzione, sia dovuto a un qualche paradigma comune, a un qualche parallelismo fra l'universo artistico o politico o sociale o culturale nel quale Dante viveva, e che riprende nella cosmologia della *Divina Commedia*, e l'universo politico, sociale e culturale in cui vive l'intelligenza contemporanea americana - se ci sia qualche forma di parallelismo che aiuta questo interesse per Dante, una figura così lontana nel tempo.

PINSKY:

As far as I know, there is no equivalent in American life to what one's city meant to one. What Florence meant to Dante is perhaps somewhere between what my family means to me, what my home town in New Jersey, where my family has been for three or four generations, means to me, and what the United States of America means to me. Perhaps one's school as well? A friend of mine was a poet who taught at Brandeis University, a Jewish university in Massachusetts, though he was not Jewish; someone noticed that Brandeis had no school song, and so he said: «Frank, you should write the school song for Brandeis». And my friend said immediately: «Brandeis, our mother, we love you and we hate you». And this is true of our families: we love them and we hate them. It was supremely, obviously, clearly true for Dante that his identity, everything had to do with his city – a city which betrayed him, falsely accused him, expelled him. It is as though your family dishonours you and you can't see it but still you want to see it.

This is to speak psychologically. Politically, it's no secret that Americans, including patriotic Americans of which I consider myself one, sometimes hate our country; we hate what we as a country do, we are angry at our government, and not only at the government, but at the people who voted for the government, the people who send their children to die in wars, angry in this sense at ourselves as a nation. I don't wish to overdo this, but that sense of an attachment, as with worse things that happen in a family, that may help me to understand Dante's relationship to Florence.

This is not the way I ordinarily think about the poem, but if I speculate, encouraged by your question to think that way, to understand the ambivalence that one can feel towards one's allegiances... I probably should have included religion... it was perhaps a little like a civil religion to be a Florentine, the way you feel about the religion, the family, the country, the culture that has formed you, and from which you also feel alienated: among other things, certainly in its first half, but really all the way through the *Commedia*, Dante wrote a great poem on that subject.

KOMUNYAKAA:

In a certain sense, America is always attempting to reinvent itself. We have used world literature and culture as elements in that process of reinvention, as the engine through which our myth-making is driven. And, yes, Dante's vision is one of many lenses through which we view aspects of our cultural history. But, of course, like each of us, Dante possessed his own flaws and shortcomings. Perhaps that's what draws us to his enchanting vision again and again – his over-idealization of earthly matters. We only have to think of the numerous instances where Robert Lowell's vision intersects with Dante's. At times, it seems that their shared argument concerning the marriage of heaven and hell is almost a single, unbroken song. Each is written with a fluid continuity, and I think, at the centre of each vision is that argument with the self. Likewise, the contemporary American poet seems possessed by a similar need for an internal dialogue – a voyage within, to the core. It is that going back and forth, that argument within oneself, within one's heart, that becomes instructive from a contemporary point-of-view. A clarity of vision is informed by a continuous dialogue, because that is the space from where the spirit of democracy arises. I don't think, however, that I can say that Dante possessed an idea about democracy. Let's face it, Dante was a citizen of his time: his vision is based on a class structure that is primarily feudalistic. Matter-of-fact, Dante probably sees class distinction as a necessary mechanism for elevating his central character, Beatrice, beyond this human world. That is, Beatrice couldn't exist as Beatrice if she didn't possess (in Dante's mind) certain attributes that would transport her beyond reason. She's depicted as a soul beyond flesh. Such an abstraction is based on illusions embedded in class and its various stratifications. Robert Pinsky addressed the problem of the United States sending young men off to war, of those inducted into a military machine which is definitely class-based. Indeed, perhaps we are drawn to Dante because he does wrestle with doubt and mystery. That need to inquire into the depth of one's spirit as an artist – as a country – is what ties the contemporary poet to that medieval seer.

BARRETT:

I'd like to begin by saying how very much I like Pinsky's translation: it's an absolutely wonderful translation. What I enjoyed most about it is exactly what his opening remarks were about, the speed one feels in the Dante original that you often lose in the English translation especially in some older translations where the translator is thinking, you have got to make it sound like Milton! To have a translation that not only captures that speed, but it actually exaggerates it (because, as you say, English is a speedy language) is an enormously satisfying experience aesthetically as a reader of the *Inferno*. As a teacher of *Inferno* in translation, it led me to a few little problems. For example, in Canto V (from line 100) there are three famous tercets

in Francesca's speech that begin with *Amor*. I never even have to look at the page because I see those three appearances of *Amor* or Love.

I came to your translation and I could not find them because 'Love' is not at the beginning of the tercets [...] I was just wondering how this happened, whether it was simply a result of that speed business, and how you feel about it.

PINSKY:

This is an excellent example of the limitations of any translation – and of mine in particular! It would be marvellous to have the parallel lines with parallel rhymes. Dante was one of the greatest love poets; if he had never written the *Commedia*, he would have still be one of the greatest love poets. In that passage, he in a sense puts into Francesca's mouth what could easily be a sonnet – her speech's structure and lush repetition resemble those of a sonnet.

On the other hand, in English, beginning in the 16th century, internal rhyme and internal repetition became a parallel device, closely related to end-rhyme, so the degree of artificiality in English is somewhat comparable. Certainly, substituting internal rhyme and repetition for end-rhyme, moving parallelism to the sentences from the lines – all that is a compromise. To justify the compromise one might say that the degree of artificiality in English end rhyme and line // syntax parallelism would be greater than in Italian, richer in rhyme. In other words, yes, that is a

loss and a compromise. I was very aware of it in the passage you cite. I believe that I wrote thinking consciously of Philip Sidney's sonnet, the lines:

*O Moon, tell me,
Is constant love deem'd there but want of wit?
Are beauties there as proud as here they be?
Do they above love to be loved, and yet
Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?*

Echoing that 16th century line «Do they above love to be loved», I write «Love, which absolves / None who are loved from loving made my heart burn...» to get some of that concentrated honey, at least in the internal rhyme. It's a good example of what one can and cannot do.

SANGUINETI [...]*

SEDAKOVA:

Che cosa è Dante mi sembra la cosa più attuale nei nostri giorni in Russia così come nel mondo: la sua intensità intellettuale e concettuale. L'arte europea e l'arte russa mai era stata così ricca per contenuto come Dante. Dante aveva preso il suo contenuto dalla teologia, dalla filosofia di Aristotele, e da tanti altri. Che cosa potrebbe avere il poeta attuale per avere questa acutezza intellettuale? Mi sembra di parlare di Dante come artista, e solo artista, ma era un pensatore. E perciò penso che manca la traduzione dantesca letterale per prendere tutto il contesto intellettuale e teologico, necessario per tutti gli artisti del nostro tempo.



Sandow Birk, *Inf.* XII, 11-12, *The Minotaur*.



Michael Mazur, *Inf.* IV, *Limbo*,
acquaforte e acquatinta, 1996.

* Trascrizione non approvata dall'autore.